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Title

Leo Treadway Oral History Interview and Transcript

Date

November 10, 2017

Extant

1 hour 35 minutes interview and 1 transcript

Abstract

In this oral history, Leo Treadway, a founding member of Lutherans Concerned/North America and founder of Wingspan Ministry, discusses founding the Lesbian and Gay Interfaith Alliance, as well as helping the Minnesota Council of Churches to adopt their historic "Statement on Ministry To and With Gay and Lesbian Minnesotans" before it was disavowed. He describes his work advocating for LGBT youth, LBGT human rights protections, and AIDs awareness. Treadway actively works to archive and preserve the history of Minnesota's LGBT community.

Biographical

Leo Treadway is most well-known for his leadership of Lutherans Concerned/North America; the development of the Wingspan Ministry at St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, and through that context his educational and advocacy efforts across a broad expanse of church and society; his creation of the first programming for GLBT youth in Minnesota; and, more recently, his work with the Minnesota Historical Society to insure the preservation and archiving of Minnesota's GLBT heritage.

While not ordained, Leo became active with the fledgling Lutherans Concerned for Gay People (later Lutherans Concerned/North America) within a month of their formation in the Twin Cities and represented them at the American Lutheran Church Assembly of Congregations in Detroit later that same year (1974). Leaving a marriage, he relocated to the Twin Cities and immediately immersed himself in the activities of the local LCGP chapter, eventually serving as chair of the chapter for several years.

Recognizing the need for expanded organizing at the national level (among gay and lesbian Lutherans), Leo eventually served as co-chair of Lutherans Concerned/North America with

Pastor Anita Hill (later to become his colleague with St. Paul-Reformation's Wingspan Ministry, and finally to be ordained in defiance of ELCA policy). During his tenure as national co-chair (1978-1982), Leo helped to expand LC/NA into an international organization with the recognition of Canadian GLBT Lutherans. He currently serves on a LC/NA Task Force that is developing a Partnership Project with GLBT Lutherans in Brazil. The Reconciled In Christ Project was developed and implemented under his leadership and he assisted St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church in becoming its first registered congregation. A liturgist by avocation, Leo provided leadership and inspiration for the development of Orders for Worship, addressing the needs of both women and men, as well as addressing the positive faith experience of lesbians and gay men. He collaborated with others to develop *Creating Worship That Welcomes and Includes*, a resource still available through LC/NA (including a Order of Service in Celebration of Coming Out, and several orders for the Celebration of Union). At local, national and international levels, Leo encouraged GLBT Lutherans to develop cooperative relationships with other GLBT religious organizations and his work led to the creation of the Lesbian and Gay Interfaith Council of Minnesota. Later, in his role as co-chair for LC/NA, Leo served as one of the founding members of the Lesbian and Gay Interfaith Alliance, a national organization committed to helping the many established and newly emerging GLBT religious groups to work, worship and advocate collaboratively.

By 1981, Leo's continuing work with the local LC/NA chapter in the Twin Cities led him to believe in the importance of finding a home congregation that would be fully welcoming of GLBT people, their friends and families and who would actively advocate on their behalf. That year became a year of "mission development" with St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church and resulted, the following year, in the establishment of the Wingspan Ministry.

Leo served as a Ministry Associate with the congregation and Wingspan for another 12 years. During that period, Leo successfully used that congregational base to provide active leadership in community organizing and development with Minnesota's GLBT communities. In early 1982, working closely with Pastor Paul Tidemann (senior pastor at St. Paul Reformation), Leo helped the Minnesota Council of Churches to adopt their historic "Statement on Ministry To and With Gay and Lesbian Minnesotans." Although adopted by their board with a significant majority, this statement sparked a whirlwind of reaction, ending in the firing of the Council's Executive Director. A few years later, secretive actions by another Executive Director quietly disavowed that the historic statement had ever really been adopted. In the meantime, church bodies and congregations all across Minnesota were given the opportunity to learn about, discuss, and argue over ministry with their GLBT sons and daughters.

Leo's earlier involvement with the St. Paul Citizens for Human Rights campaign (1977-78) had paved the way for his commitment to advocacy for legal protections for Minnesota's GLBT citizens. Twenty years of educational and organizing work, advocacy, and leadership led to the passage of statewide human rights protections, signed into law by the governor in 1993. During that journey, Leo served on three task forces appointed by successive Minnesota governors: The Governor's Task Force on Prejudice and Violence that led to two new laws protecting Minnesotans from hate crimes and upgrading the penalties for such actions; The Governor's Task Force on Lesbian and Gay Minnesotans, and later The Governor's Task Force on Gay and Lesbian Minnesotans, both of which paved the way for full human rights protection.

During service on all three task forces, Leo strongly advocated the use of public hearings throughout the state, for the first time allowing GLBT Minnesotans the opportunity to speak to state-appointed officials about their experiences with prejudice and discrimination. These

hearings throughout Minnesota formed an enduring commitment for Leo to advocacy on behalf of GLBT citizens in small towns and cities all around Minnesota; and he was to become known for his unflagging commitment to helping such communities become recognized and represented in the state's major GLBT organizations.

Through this community organizing Leo came to recognize the financial needs of many small and emerging GLBT organizations in the Twin Cities and, more broadly, throughout the state. In accepting the invitation to join the Headwaters Fund as Chair of its Grantmaking Committee, Leo committed the foundation to become increasingly more proactive in funding GLBT programs and projects. He left this volunteer position after achieving his goal and moved on to become involved with the PhilanthroFund Foundation, a small foundation from within the GLBT community itself, where he again became involved in the grantmaking process. Before his departure from this board, he helped to design a more proactive outreach to small GLBT organizations in Minnesota and the Upper Midwest.

When the HIV crisis hit Minnesota (in the early 1980s), this too became part of Leo's ministry work through Wingspan. Although he created and established the "Embrace Hope" series of prayer services for those affected by HIV, Leo is perhaps better remembered for chairing the effort that brought the NAMES Project Quilt to Minnesota during its first display tour of the nation. Leo developed other major efforts to bring public and community attention to the AIDS crisis, including the area premiere of Buddies and a widely publicized piece of guerrilla theatre involving Leo in protesting the restrictive policies being encouraged by the Berean League (a long time enemy to GLBT people in Minnesota). In a less confrontational setting, Leo also served on the HIV Task Force for the Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Health (a group whose primary task was to recommend levels of funding for HIV programs in the state).

In 1983, Leo began work on a long-time interest and helped to develop the state's first established programming for GLBT youth, a weekly support group for which Leo provided leadership during the next decade. From such a humble beginning, Leo was able to provide an enormous amount of training and advocacy for youth-serving organizations and professionals in Minnesota as well as nationally. He developed a high profile poster series on GLBT youth issues (still available from Wingspan Ministries) and managed to have these posters carried in buses throughout the Twin Cities. His work with GLBT youth, and on their behalf, led to his selection as a recipient for the McKnight Foundation Award in 1987. Yet he credits the high point of this portion of his career with the establishment of the Out 4 Good program in the Minneapolis School District--one of the first programs to help GLBT students, teachers, staff, and parents in the nation.

As his career and ministry have aged, Leo has now turned his interests to the preservation and archiving of Minnesota's GLBT population. In addition to donating an extraordinary amount of material to the Minnesota Historical Society, Leo helped them establish the GLBT Collections Working Group, a project he chaired until stepping down in 2003. Currently, Leo is working to establish regional GLBT Collections elsewhere in Minnesota. Despite his continuing commitment to build the MHS Collection, once again Leo is on the road traveling and visiting smaller GLBT communities in Minnesota--something for which he has a great passion. With numerous articles and contributed chapters to his credit, Leo is now working on two books with a lesbian colleague--one a memoir style reporting of "critical moments in Minnesota GLBT history," and the second a photo essay, seeking to retain a visual memory of Minnesota's GLBT community organizations and queer spaces. Although now part of a

passing generation of GLBT leadership, Leo has well over 1,000 speaking engagements to his credit, including his well-known Queer Jeopardy program on GLBT history.

Now living in partial retirement from his previous demanding schedule on GLBT issues, Leo has committed a significant portion of his time helping to strengthen Minnesota's Asian and Pacific Islander communities through leadership on the Planning Committee of the Dragon Festival. In 2003, Leo was the chief organizer for the Dragon Boat Races and was delighted to see the gay-identified Long Yang Club take first prize in their division.

But despite retirement, Leo continues to work on behalf of various causes which benefit minority communities. Through his home congregation, Leo worked to help provide sanctuary, housing and support for a Nigerian immigrant family. Additionally, he works with a new set of programs at St. Paul-Reformation: Shear Grace (a free haircut program for homeless youth and families), and in partnership with The Sheridan Project (providing meal bags for school children unlikely to have sufficient food over the weekend).

He continues his board membership for AEDA (Asian Economic Development Association), which provides business loans for Asian-American businesses, while also supporting the local Asian American arts community and artists. Leo continues his commitment to GLBT youth, and is a regular speaker at a local St. Paul Middle School's program for GLBT students - some 80 in regular attendance. For several years Leo collaborated with others in a project designed to raise funds and provide support for GLBT organizations in Uganda - while at the same time, raising awareness of their needs with Minnesota's GLBT communities. Leo will be returning to Brazil in October 2018 to reestablish and strengthen connections with GLBT Lutherans in that country. Leo was awarded the "Lifetime Achievement Award for a GLBT Individual" in 2018, by Reconciling Works, at their biennial Assembly in Minneapolis.

Leo is pictured with Squeaker, who appeared with Leo in an edition of "The Lutheran," becoming infamous in the process. Even with these activities, Leo's current cat (Zazu) remains unimpressed and has made it quite clear that his primary responsibility should be as her minion!

Scope and Content

In this oral history, Leo Treadway, a founding member of Lutherans Concerned/North America and founder of Wingspan Ministry, discusses the founding the Lesbian and Gay Interfaith Alliance, as well as helping the Minnesota Council of Churches to adopt their historic "Statement on Ministry To and With Gay and Lesbian Minnesotans" before it was disavowed. His work has included advocating for LBGT human rights protections and AIDs awareness, and forming groups to support LGBT youth. Treadway is currently working to archive and preserve the history of Minnesota's LGBT community.

This interview was conducted by Obie Holman, a volunteer for Goodsoil, an LGBT advocacy coalition, and author of *Queer Clergy: A History of Gay and Lesbian Ministry in American Protestantism*.

Access

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<https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org/oral-histories/leo-treadway>.

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Languages

Collection material is in English

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